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Knowledge and Use of Folic Acid Among North Carolina Women

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: In 1992 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended that all women of reproductive age consume 400 micrograms of folic acid every day in order to reduce their risk of having a pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect. The purpose of this study is to examine the level of folic acid knowledge and intake among North Carolina women who have recently given birth.

Methods: Data for this study were obtained from the 1999 North Carolina PRAMS survey, which is an ongoing survey of North Carolina resident women who have delivered a live born infant within the previous three months. The survey ascertains data on the mother's knowledge of folic acid, sources of information on folic acid, and preconceptional intake of multivitamins or folic acid supplements. In this analysis, knowledge and use of folic acid according to selected maternal demographic characteristics are analyzed and compared. Percentages are weighted so that the results are representative of all women who delivered an infant during calendar year 1999.

Results: Approximately 77 percent of all women had heard or read about the benefits of folic acid. Just slightly over one-half of all women reported that they had heard about folic acid from their doctor or health care provider. Only about 26 percent of women took folic acid every day prior to pregnancy, according to CDC recommendations. There were marked differences among various sociodemographic groups with respect to knowledge and intake of folic acid. Mothers who were older, better educated, married, and had higher incomes were most likely to have heard about folic acid and to have taken it every day before pregnancy.

Conclusions: The percentage of North Carolina women who take folic acid prior to pregnancy is low. Because folic acid is an effective, simple, and inexpensive means of preventing serious birth defects such as anencephaly and spina bifida, it is important that health care providers and the public health community make a concerted effort to teach all women who are capable of becoming pregnant to consume on a daily basis multivitamins containing 400 micrograms of folic acid, in addition to eating a balanced, healthy diet.

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